Volume III.
Number 7.

Week of
March 23, 1942

Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS

1942

INDEX

Stage Play	Pages
All in Favor	380, 381, 382
*Cafe Crown	370, 371, 372, 373
First Crocus (The)	397, 398, 399
Flowers of Virtue (The)	354, 355, 356
*Guest in the House	336, 337, 338
*Heart of a City	346, 347, 348
Hedda Gabler	358, 359, 360, 361
*Jason	377, 378, 379, 380
Johnny on a Spot	391, 392, 393
†*Johnny 2X4	326, 327, 328
†*Kiss for Cinderella (A)	332, 333, 334
Lady Comes Across	388, 389, 390
Lily of the Valley	365, 366, 367, 368
Papa Is All	394, 395, 396
Plan M	342, 343, 344
*Porgy and Bess	373, 374, 375, 376
†*Priorities of 1942	329, 330, 331
Rivals (The)	384, 385, 386, 387
Solitaire	362, 363, 364, 365
They Should Have Stood in Bed	349, 350, 351
Under This Roof	339, 340, 341

PRODUCTIONS CONTINUING

Reviews appeared in the 1941 CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS

Stage Play	1941 Vol. Pages
*Angel Street	182, 183, 184, 185
*Arsenic and Old Lace	417, 418, 419, 420
*Banjo Eyes	164, 165, 166, 167
*Best Foot Forward	286, 287, 288, 289
*Blithe Spirit	237, 238, 239, 240
*High Kickers	246, 247, 248
It Happens on Ice	472, 473, 474
*Revised 1941 Edition	340
*Junior Miss	211, 212, 213, 214
*Lady in the Dark	400, 401, 402, 403
*Let's Face It	249, 250, 251, 252
*Life With Father	489, 490, 491
*My Sister Eileen	445, 446, 447
*Sons o' Fun	193, 194, 195, 196
*Spring Again	229, 230, 231, 232

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of March 23, 1942.*
†"A Kiss for Cinderella" opened Tuesday, March 10th, at the Music Box Theatre.
†"Priorities of 1942" opened Thursday, March 12th, at the 46th Street Theatre.
†"Johnny 2X4" opened Monday, March 16th, at the Longacre Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

Place this week's reviews with preceding weekly reviews so as to have always an up to date file of the New York Stage.

Published by

CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, 122 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y.

Yearly Subscription
$15.00

"Johnny 2x4"

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
March 17, 1942

'Johnny 2x4' Opens At Longacre Theatre

Rowland Brown Produces His Own Play About Gaudy Old Speakeasy Days

By JOHN ANDERSON

IN LETTING out a sigh for the fine, gaudy old days of the speakeasy, Rowland Brown has, unfortunately, also let out a play on the subject, a play called "Johnny 2x4," which the author presented last night at the Longacre.

I would like to join Mr. Brown in a cheerful cry over the lost wild dews of prohibition and the happy lawlessness of the years when gangsters were local and not international nuisances, but somehow his play seems as phony as the labels we used to cherish, "just off the boat," and as dead as the era it celebrates. It is no nearer full strength than near-beer, and lacks, I'm afraid, both substance and kick.

This will be a sad blow, of course, to all sentimental addicts of the "noble experiment" who cherished the speakeasy as the last stand of exclusive society and punctilious drinking. Mr. Brown plainly has the affection the historian needs for such a chronicle of the golden days, but his memory is hazy in spots and his writing talent unsteady. It sounds like the play that was projected from a thousand backrooms of the Volstead Renaissance, only this time the play, and not the author, has come out wabbling.

You could scratch the plot out yourself on the back of an old "membership card." Here is the square guy running a joint in Greenwich Village, with a dashing pal who mixes up in too many rackets. Here is the little singer who gets her chance in the friendly warmth of those convivial souls who used to assemble nightly and carefully break the law in a national salute to Pussyfoot Johnson, Carrie Nation and Gloomy Gus.

Faintly Incredible

Here are the chiselers and the mobsters, the mean-hearted little fellows and the big-hearted good ones—all lumped together as enemies of society by the beverage bossing of the venerated Volstead. They are all gone now, along with the gusty Guinan, and the happy suckers who never got an even break. In "Johnny 2x4" they seem not only fadingly romantic, but faintly incredible and, what is worst of all, very, very dull.

Mr. Brown's chief trouble is that he hasn't written a coherent play. It is all atmosphere and no structure. His plot darts here and there hiding among the crannies of the show while the stage is given over to musical numbers, songs of the Yacht Club Boys, and by Evelyn Wyckoff and Marie Austin, and by some superb horn-playing by Leonard Sues.

Individually Good

Though such numbers are often individually good, there are so many of them that the play seems always in danger of becoming just a recital in a speakeasy setting for the entertainment of the actors instead of the customers out front. Perhaps if the author would serve real drinks on the stage, he could do better by selling admissions to the cast.

It is a cast of enormous size, but in spite of this, and the complications of a large, fascinating scene, designed by Howard Bay, it is smoothly directed by Anthony Brown. Jack Arthur is excellent in the title part, and Barry Sullivan again has the bad luck to struggle with a part that just isn't fully written. Miss Wyckoff comes off well enough in her song numbers, but the character she plays is sketchy, and Harry Bellaver, Bert Frohman and Miss Austin make the most of some equally skimpy assignments.

Nothing in the play challenges the eminence of "Broadway" as the head melodrama of a prohibition night club. Mr. Brown has merely added to our current miseries by making us sigh for the good old plays.

NEW YORK TIMES
March 17, 1942

Rowland Brown's 'Johnny 2x4' Goes Through Cycle of Cut-Liquor and Murder in Greenwich Village

By BROOKS ATKINSON

PEEKING back to the sinful days of 1926, Rowland Brown has discovered a Greenwich Village speakeasy. In "Johnny 2x4," which was staged at the Longacre, he has made a densely populated play out of it, and fitted it out with some good vintage songs and one brilliant trumpet solo. But it seems either incredible or discouraging to this department to realize that Mr. Brown has gone to so much trouble and expense without having an original idea to contribute. For it is no news to us now that gangsters who kill get killed in time, or that the speakeasy society went through a boiled shirt era and expired with repeal and the depression. In 1926 George Abbott and Phil Dunning wrote "Broadway" in honor of the glamorous underworld. "Johnny 2x4" has not caught up with the first whirling drama in that medium.

* * *

Apart from squaring a circle, one of the most difficult tricks in the world is to write a play about nightclubs without bogging down in the dullness of nightclub entertainment. Mr. Brown has warded off the misery with three items—Evelyn Wyckoff singing "Close Your Eyes" with honeyed melancholy, Marie Austin singing "Down by the O-Hi-O" with husky, snarling gusto, and Leonard Sues blowing a sweet-and-hot version of "Blue Prelude" on his brass horn. Mr. Sues is a master of this sort of nonsense. He can blow music with impudence, lusciousness and brotherly love. He can toss in a bar or two of old-fashioned cornet strut-music for good measure. Any time Mr. Sues wants to start fingering his trumpet the art of the drama will naturally suspend activity until he is finished.

* * *

But the rest of "Johnny 2x4" celebrates an epoch of dissipation that has long ago lost its flavor. It is as flat as the glass of beer that stood all night on the end table in the talking-room. For Mr. Brown has merely skipped around the house picking up odds and ends of commonplace dialogue from the bar-keep, the corner strumpet, the genial host, the bootleg king and the rival gangster. If you wait long enough you can see the bootleg king dying heroically, a-babbling of green bottles, and the body of the gangster tumbling out of the telephone booth.

Taking Mr. Brown at his own word, Howard Bay has designed a pungent basement hell-hole, full of gloom and stagnant air. Jack Arthur plays the host like a subdued version of Bill Gaxton—very good, too. Barry Sullivan is the lethal whisky desperado with a definite romantic flavor. As the barkeep Lew Eckels has a deep voice and a confidential manner in an honorable tradition. Bert Frohman's gangster with a long memory and Douglas Dean's light-stepping dancer are good for Mr. Brown's purposes. For a plug-ugly with a heart of gold you can do no better than Harry Bellaver, who could sell violets or commit murder with equal affability.

But "Johnny 2x4" is only a hack's dream. It made this department homesick for "Pal Joey."

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
March 17, 1942

Warm Highball and Dull Gunfire

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

JOHNNY 2 x 4 is the saga of a night spot in Greenwich Village that led a double life during speakeasy days. While the customers danced and drank their rye-and-ginger ales and took in the floor show, the proprietor and the boys in the backroom packed a rod and did a few little jobs and went about their rackets.

Pretty plainly, Rowland Brown visualized this double life as worth its theatrical weight in gold. On the one side, there was all the nostalgic appeal of the good old days, and on the other all the tingling lure of melodrama. He'd drop you down into one of those smoke-filled, sour-smelling caves with a friendly cop on deck, and a knowing bartender, and a blowsy gal on the town; and he'd give you the works in the way of a floor show, all the way from a pretty blonde torch singer to an accomplished young man with a horn. And between whiles he'd get on with the story of the gangsters, their feuds and their molls and their getaways, and in particular the story of the handsome bad boy who ended up with a bullet in his belly.

Well, it's all there, and it adds up to just about nothing. So far as the atmosphere of the night club goes, it's authentic enough. That's the trouble. The joint puts on just the kind of show you used to see. It was third-rate then, and it's third-rate now. In the old days, however, it seemed like a hell of a lot more fun because you watched it with three or four drinks under your belt.

And so far as the melodrama goes, Mr. Brown has confused his memories of the old days with his memories of the old plays. His plot is just a rehash, in fact almost a take-off, of the gangster melodramas of the 20s. And to make matters worse, Mr. Brown handles his stale plot without any savvy, bringing nothing to it in the way of sharp pacing, fresh characterization or good dialogue.

There's an enormous cast, most of it sitting speechlessly at tables to create atmosphere. Jack Arthur makes a convincing enough proprietor, and Barry Sullivan a good enough stage version of a glamor-boy racketeer, Evelyn Wyckoff makes a pretty torch singer and Douglas Dean taps neatly. As one of those familiar barrel-shaped toughies of the period who sang off-color songs, Marie Austin proves the best thing in the show. The famous Yacht Club boys are also around, but to no particular advantage.

Howard Bay's fine set does much more to bring back the old days than anything in the play.

"Johnny 2x4"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
March 17, 1942

'Johnny 2x4' Takes You Back to Those Old Speakeasy Days

"Johnny 2x4," drama by Rowland Brown. Produced at the Longacre theatre, New York, March 16, 1942.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

YOU can, being interested, live over those good old gangster-speakeasy days of the prohibition era by giving the nod to the man in the box office of the Longacre Theatre. Slip him a couple of dollars and you will not even have to ask for "Joe."

The play is one called "Johnny 2x4," and it is so completely saturated in the atmosphere of the period that you can almost smell the wet barcloths and the perspiring dancers.

Between acts you can go out into the lobby and be pushed around by practically the same crowd you used to meet here and there between 1926 and 1936, or at least an excellent imitation of the same.

"Johnny 2x4" is a musical melodrama, reminiscent but not nostalgic. As melodrama it is on the "Broadway" order, with a touch of "The Time of Your Life" in setting but not in mood. As a musical it is punctuated with songs representative of the period.

It is staged by Anthony Brown (who rose to prominence with the direction of a little number entitled "Tobacco Road" nine years ago) with a realism that is carefully and skillfully detailed.

Realistic Doings

If it is a realism that fails to stir any definite emotional response with you, it is because Rowland Brown, who wrote "Johnny," fails to interest you particularly in any of the character types he uses to tell his story.

These types include Johnny in person, a lackadaisical proprietor of a nightclub who fraternized with gunmen and trafficked with the more genteel crooks of his day, preserving a kind of ethical standard of his own.

You meet Johnny on the way up, when he was fighting the beer rackets; spend a little time with him when he had achieved a prosperous clientele and a healthy profit, and leave him as he is on his way down after repeal.

In his "2x4 Club" you meet Coaly, a gangster, and Mary, his girl; Rudy, the hoofer and Mabel, whom he loved and left; "Butch" the hat girl and Knuckles, her stooge; Midal the killer and Apples the horn player who bumped him off.

They are a fairly verminous lot, but true, I assume, to type. Stage type at least. My acquaintance with their actual prototypes is admittedly limited.

Rough But Effective

They are roughly played, but with such enthusiasm and assurance that again they suggest that one of the Browns—Rowland, the author, or Anthony, the director—knows his resorts and their habitues.

That might easily be Rowland, seeing that he has specialized in gangster pictures for the screen.

The cast includes Jack Arthur, who has devoted the last ten years to radio. Jack is giving color and a certain verisimilitude to the role of Johnny.

Evelyn Wyckoff, the heroine, is a pretty girl with a nice voice, also from radio and promising. Barry Sullivan plays the tough Coaly without fooling anybody. Isabel Jewel is a saddened hariot and Bert Frohman dies convincingly with his boots and a sneer on.

The Yacht Club quartet sings when asked. Leonard Sues plays his horn at the drop of a cue. Marie Austin sings hot songs to hot responses.

Howard Bay has furnished a solid and tricky setting. Last night's audience was decidedly friendly and evidently well informed as to Author Brown's sources of information.

'JOHNNY 2 X 4'

A melodrama in three acts by Rowland Brown; staged by Anthony Brown; produced by the author at the Longacre Theater on March 16, 1942. The cast:

Creepy	Lester Lonergan, Jr.
Pete	Lew Eckels
Bottles	Yehudi Wyner
Mike Maloney	Ralph Chambers
John 2 x 4	Jack Arthur
The Yacht Club Boys,	Charles Adler, George Kelly, Rodney McLennan and Don Richards
Coaly Lewis	Barry Sullivan
Beetle-puss	Bert Reed
Mary Collins	Evelyn Wyckoff
Dutch	Jack Lambert
Martin	Arthur L. Sachs
Mabel	Isabel Jewell
Knuckles Kelton	Harry Bellaver
Butch	Marie Austin
Rudy Denton	Douglas Dean
Burns	Sam Raskyn
The B Girls,	Marianne O'Brien, Muriel Cole, Irene Collett, Josi Johnson, Natalie Draper and Carolyn Cromwell
Ohio Customer	Eddie Hodge
Midal	Bert Frohman
Apples	Leonard Sues
Billy the Booster	James La Curto
Harry	Al Durant
Cigarette Girl	Monica Lewis
Maxine	Karen Van Ryn
Dot	Wilma Drake
Jerry Sullivan	Russel Conway
Kean	Thom Conroy
Bottles (grown up)	Lance Elliot

NEW YORK POST
March 17, 1942

"Johnny 2 X 4" Recreates the Speakeasy Era, at the Longacre

By WILELLA WALDORF

ROWLAND BROWN, described in the program as "a Hollywood rebel," has come out of the West with "Johnny 2 X 4," a melodrama of his own authorship which he produced last night at the Longacre Theatre. It is a period piece, laid in a Greenwich Village dive during the speakeasy era and there is more honky-tonk night club about it than Broadway play, but it offers nostalgic entertainment for those who remember the underground revelry of an almost unbelievable period in American history.

Misty eyed, and with a lump in his throat, Mr. Brown recreates that merry decade, 1926-36, when bootlegging was a major industry, every other door led to a speakeasy, and the song and dance numbers of the inevitable "floor show" were punctuated by shots without or within, signaling the demise of another trigger man. You can almost taste the bathtub gin.

After two lush acts of Volstead prosperity, the third gives us a heart-rending picture of what repeal did to that horde of ambitious boys and girls swept to fame and fortune on a torrent of bootleg booch. Mr. Brown manages to work up almost as much false sentiment over the death of Prohibition, and some of its more ruthless offspring, as the old-timers used to achieve with beery renditions of "The Face on the Bar-room Floor."

A Lively Floor Show

Mr. Brown keeps his show going by putting on an almost continuous floor show for two acts, featuring amiable 2 X 4 piano playing and warbling by Jack Arthur, proprietor of the joint; elegant trumpeting by Leonard Sues, snappy stepping by Douglas Dean, comic quartet business by the Yacht Club Boys, and assorted song numbers by Marie Austin, Evelyn Wyckoff and Monica Lewis.

Like most night club entertainment, the floor show would probably have seemed more world-shattering had Mr. Brown arranged to serve a few gallons of bootleg liquor to the audience from time to time, to create the proper mood. Even viewed in a state of sobriety, however, it had its moments, and there was always a certain amount of suspense generated by the knowedge that most of the patrons carried gats and thought nothing of disposing of a couple of dead bodies between drinks.

Racketeers dropped in, drank their double mickey-finns like good fellows, and were carried out by the singing waiters. Characters named Creepy, Bottles, Beetle-Puss, Knuckles Kelton, Apples and Billy the Booster hung around the bar while Isabel Jewell, cast as a street-walker with a heart of gold, drowned her sorrows and eventually passed out carrying a check for a thousand dollars from a cad who had risen above her.

Bootleggers With Gats

Barry Sullivan and Bert Frohman as rival gunmen in the rum-running trade provided most of the suspense by assuming an Edward G. Robinson leer at frequent intervals, and by the middle of the second act Mr. Brown's play had all but disappeared except at sporadic moments. The third act waxed woefully maudlin over the corpses of its leading lawbreakers.

As a drama, "Johnny 2 X 4" is largely tripe, but as a nostalgic dip into an amazing decade in our history that we devoutly hope will never repeat itself, it is often entertaining in its ginny fashion. Anthony Brown, the director, has kept things moving, the large cast is generally effective, and Howard Bay's setting looks like any number of grubby dens so popular in the days when lots of people who hated night clubs were unable to resist the fascination of breaking the law behind a secret door with a little hole in it.

"Johnny 2x4"

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
March 17, 1942

Speakeasy Days

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

FOR some of us there is no getting away from the nostalgic appeal of the Terrible Twenties. Judged from any sensible ethical viewpoint, those turbulent days provided a pretty deplorable period in the national annals. A wild and foolish epoch, where values were distorted, rum-running was a romantic occupation, the speakeasy was the characteristic institution and the bootlegger was king, it was a time of foolishness, corruption and the sowing of the seeds of destruction and doom. At the same time, it was undeniably an era of fun, gusto, vitality and pleasurable excitement, with a good deal of picturesque color about it. In fact, it was the legitimate and more melodramatic successor to the so-called Gay Nineties in American story and legend. This is a roundabout way of getting down to talking about Rowland Brown's play, "Johnny 2x4," but it explains a lot about it.

* * *

There is very little to be said on behalf of "Johnny 2x4" as a play. It is a ramshackle sort of dramatic affair at best, a series of sentimental and melodramatic incidents thrown together in a debonairly slipshod fashion, and a sort of maudlin crying jag about the aweli fellows, the wonderful girls and the charming killers of the period. Characteristically, it has its best sobs over the death of a completely worthless racketeer and gunman and the jilting of a lugubrious girl of the near-by pavements. Yet to those of us who share Mr. Brown's fascination with this curious day in our history it manages to be disarmingly entertaining in its completely shameless way. For it is written by a man who obviously knows and loves the disreputable lore of the '20s and their speakeasy escapades, and so many of the episodes and characters have a recognizability for us that we almost share the playwright's rose-colored glasses.

* * *

Chiefly "Johnny 2x4" is the loose-jointed account of the rise and fall of a speakeasy. What little plot it offers tells something or other about the beautiful friendship between the fine, noble and generally upstanding proprietor of the club and the swaggering, larcenous and homicidal, but equally fine, noble and upstanding racketeer who was his best pal. Mr. Brown, who is among the more picturesque Hollywood figures, has written a couple of excellently melodramatic gangster scenes, has taken some neat raps at his quondam home town and has managed his atmosphere with conviction if rather with a trowel, too. Chiefly, though, his play is pretty primitive, commonplace and boozily trivial in its sentimentality, even if his gifts as a romantic historian are commendable to those of us who are his fellow emotionalists on the subject. His play is assuredly no worthy companion to "Broadway" or "The Racket," but it is frequently fun.

* * *

It must be repeated that this fun is to be derived by those of us who will tell you proudly, even though we really should no doubt confess it with shame, that we participated in some way or another in the nonsense Mr. Brown celebrates. To those unlucky enough or sensible enough to have known nothing of the period the rambling, episodic and slightly threadbare quality of the writing is likely to make "Johnny 2x4" seem cheap, sentimental and as emotionally overwrought as the torch songs which were so important a part of the era. Anyway, Jack Arthur is excellent as Johnny 2x4, the piano-playing proprietor, and Barry Sullivan, while rather conscious of his own picturesqueness, is all right as the dashing gangster. In addition, Miss Evelyn Wyckoff is attractive as the heroine, Miss Isabel Jewell is effective as the melancholy prostitute, Bert Frohman is particularly good as the only unpleasant gunman in the story, and Harry Bellaver is good as a nice gangster. The Yacht Club Boys sing typical songs and the set is effective. "Johnny 2x4" is a shameless account of a shameless era.

NEW YORK SUN
March 17, 1942

'Johnny 2x4' Ponderous Melodrama, Opens at The Longacre Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

SIXTY-ODD actors, large and small, held what appeared to be a mass meeting last evening on the stage of the Longacre Theater. Often they lapsed into song, now and then they looked at one another threateningly, sometimes they pretended to be dying of off-stage wounds. Rowland Brown, an author from Hollywood, assembled them there for the purposes of a remarkably unwieldy drama called "Johnny 2 x 4." He was less successful in thinking of things for them to do.

It is Mr. Brown's desire to tell the life story of a speakeasy, Greenwich Village vintage, which aspired in 1926, flourished in the boom years and collapsed gloomily with the coming of repeal. It was operated by a piano player, who had many friends—ghostly people, who tripped down a long flight of stairs to chat of their love affairs momentarily in the bedlam, sang their little songs and wept their tiny tears, and clambered back up again, sometimes to go on to fame and sometimes just to get shot. One pretty girl loved a gangster, but kept forgetting him for other men and got into the movies and was not very happy about it. Another young woman loved and supported a dancer who turned out to be a band leader and who married a woman with an accent. An agreeable hooligan named Knuckles spent the period between Act II and Act III in prison and came out to find that his buddy had run away with the two hundred grand.

These are thin slices of life, sandwiched in atmosphere. "Johnny 2 x 4" is opaque with atmosphere. Supernumeraries crowd so thickly on the stage that the speaking actors need police guards to reach the two or three tables which are reserved by the director for those with lines to say. The bartender quietly oozes philosophy behind his counter; half a dozen waiters diligently keep glasses filled with rather dispirited champagne. The orchestra plays anxiously; spotlights pick out Evelyn Wyckoff, Marie Austin, Monica Lewis and others with songs to sing. Now and then a gangster enters through a secret passage, sometimes coming on stage to die.

You would think that all this might make an amusing, even an exciting, melodrama. I am reluctant to discourage this optimistic thought, but "John 2 x 4" is only a theatrical encumbrance. Unskillfully directed by Anthony Brown, it is heavy on the stage. Its tiny, scattered plotlets do not coalesce. The characters have no life of their own; their small stories are so undeveloped as to be almost incomprehensible. The dialogue is often clumsy, since Mr. Brown is as profuse of words as of characters. "Johnny 2 x 4" is a ponderous nonentity in the theater.

A few of the actors manage to emerge momentarily from this plodding mob scene. Miss Wyckoff is pretty and recognizable, Miss Austin is pertly amusing, Harry Bellaver, Bert Frohman, Thom Conroy and Barry Sullivan now and then make characters of their parts. In the title role Jack Arthur does what he can. But there is never much to be done.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
March 17, 1942

Rowland Brown Presents His Own Play, Johnny 2x4

By JOHN MASON BROWN

NO ONE can accuse Rowland Brown of having been niggardly in staging his own prohibition melodrama, Johnny 2x4, at the Longacre last night. He had assembled a cast of gangsters, musicians, singers, hoofers, cigaret girls and night-club patrons (not to forget the cop, the barkeeper, the meat man, the bakery man, the waiters and the bodyguards) almost large enough to make a Federal Theater production look like a monodrama presented under private auspices.

He had also called in Howard Bay to provide the background for the Greenwich Village dive in which the trillings, the trumpetings and the murders were to take place. And a very good setting Mr. Bay had provided; smoky quarters below the street level, with the bar at one side, the orchestra at the other and tables and the proper suggestion of a dance floor tucked in between.

* * *

It was a setting that changed as the Wet-Dry years rolled on from 1926-1936. It was inevitably luscious in its prosperity and lean again after Repeal. Although it looked like a Village night club, by its emphasis and hints of drama it was plainly meant to house a play.

It was here that Mr. Brown ceased to be lavish. It was here that he became downright parsimonious. For as a script worthy of being followed or saluted as a play, Mr. Brown has been so penny-wise in the writing of Johnny 2x4 that his production of it seems the more pound-foolish. The Yacht Club boys are on hand, if you like them, to provide after-dark authenticity. When he is not committing sinister irrelevances. Leonard Sues is also present to demonstrate his genuine skill in blowing a hot trumpet. And Marie Austin, a hard-boiled songstress, percolates two numbers which are the evening's nearest approach to pleasure. But it's a long wait between floor shows at the Longacre, and there is very little in between to keep you waiting or attentive.

* * *

Of course, some hoodlums go to work when the entertainers are enjoying their protracted rests. Of course, some ruthless gangsters bluster, feud and kill. And, of course, Cupid tries to spread his clipped wings, even when pistol shots are ringing out on the street above or cadavers are hidden about the stage. But Mr. Brown is a dramatist whose excavations amid the ruins of the last days of Prohibition prove very dull and commonplace, however costly. He would have done better—oh, much, much better—to revive Broadway if he could not resist the period or what have become its clichés.

As it is, in his saga of the difficulties faced by a night-club proprietor who invented a 2x4 upright piano, Mr. Brown has wasted not only the talents of such agreeable actors as Jack Arthur, Barry Sullivan, Harry Bellaver and Isabel Jewell but the time of his audiences.

"Priorities of 1942"

NEW YORK SUN
March 13, 1942

'Priorities of 1942,' Vaudeville-revue, Opens At the 46th Street

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

VAUDEVILLE, as exemplified in "Priorities of 1942," which opened at the 46th Street Theater last night, seems to be Lou Holtz, Willie Howard, Phil Baker, Paul Draper and trimmings. This makes vaudeville a good deal funnier than this reviewer remembers it. There are absolutely no trained animals or jugglers, although there are some roller-skaters and three acrobats, including that one who is bored by the whole business and doesn't like acrobats anyway.

You may remember him; you may, indeed, remember pleasantly a good deal that you see and hear in this comically agreeable show with the absurd title. You will remember Willie Howard, probably, and his radio advice and the double talk over which Mr. Howard finally stumbles and falls flat. This is a funny number to remember, and funnier to see again. Mr. Holtz acts as master of ceremonies and is effortless and very amusing, and Mr. Baker, although around less than either of these, is sufficiently comical. He does a few imitations, vastly assisted by a sprightly young woman named Diane Denise. There are a couple of grotesque dancers and a couple of ballroom gymnasts—very nice, too—and there is, toward the end, Mr. Draper. I had never seen Mr. Draper before and my mouth is still wide open in admiration. They oughtn't to keep Mr. Draper from play reviewers as they've been doing.

It is a grab-bag sort of show. Now and then the girls come out and sing songs of no particular importance and the one or two production numbers are about what you would expect from so essentially unpretentious an entertainment. A funny man named Gene Sheldon clowns amiably and makes faces. Hazel Scott from Cafe Society plays the piano and sings, and is kept at it by a vociferous audience. A slim South American dancer named Conchita beams beautifully while Mr. Holtz proves to his satisfaction that it is tan, not make-up, on her legs. Joan Merrill reports, melodically, that man is a two-faced thing.

Much of it is familiar, but most of it is funny. Mr. Holtz and Mr. Howard, particularly, are always funny to my mind and one or the other is almost constantly on stage. There is an engaging casualness about almost all of it, and nobody pretends it is anything it isn't. It is merely an easygoing, comical hodgepodge and a good few hours of entertainment. It is a chance to see Mr. Draper and to listen to the tapping of his elegant feet, a chance to hear Mr. Howard talking in Scotch dialect and to listen to Mr. Holtz gayly ribbing those who return late from intermission.

It is, in short, two-a-day-with-chorus of a superior sort, with twice as many comedians as you could rightly expect, a roller skating number to prove it is really vaudeville and absolutely no trained animals.

'PRIORITIES OF 1942'

A vaudeville revue in two acts; ensemble music and lyrics by Marjery Fielding and Charles Barnes; presented at the Forty-sixth Street Theater on March 12, 1942, by Clifford C. Fischer. Among those in the cast are Lou Holtz, Willie Howard, Phil Baker, Paul Draper, Joan Merrill, Hazel Scott, Gene Sheldon, Loretta Fischer, the Barrys, Lari and Conchita, Beverley Lane, the Helen Reynolds Skaters and the Nonchalants.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
March 13, 1942

'Priorities of 1942' At 46th St. Theatre

Holtz, Howard, Baker and Draper Give Show Flavor of Old-Time Vaudeville

By JOHN ANDERSON

THOUGH numerous efforts have been made to revive vaudeville, none of them has been as successful as the resurrection which occurred last night at the Forty-sixth Street Theatre when Clifford C. Fischer presented a four-starred program called "Priorities of 1942."

I am not borrowing my friend Mr. Mantle's system of star rating by calling it four-starred, but simply referring to the fact that it contains the stellar presences of Lou Holtz, Willie Howard, Phil Baker and Paul Draper.

The show is not vaudeville exactly, but a small revue with two performances daily at popular prices. Its numbers range from the hilarity of Mr. Howard's low comedy to the brilliance of Mr. Drapers dancing, including some knockabout acrobats, a dazzling collection of roller skaters and one or two odd costume numbers which seem to be refugees from some forgotten musical comedy.

One or two of the numbers should be chucked out, and most of the others need shortening, but the basic material is here for an amusing show.

It can never seem exactly like vaudeville of course, without Poodles Hannaford, some Chinese acrobats and a juggling act, but we may as well face the fact that there are people nowadays who have no special meaning when they say Palace Theatre.

Mr. Holtz, it should go without saying, is the Master of Ceremonies, and he is, thank God, the same Mr. Holtz, complete with cane and white suit, jokes about Mr. Lepedus and the one about the Frenchman who was always in doubt. It is comforting to find in a changeable world that Mr. Holtz is still as funny as ever, that he has aged gracefully with his jokes, and that he can still be relied upon to effect that peculiar liaison between an audience and the stage that is the basic hospitality of vaudeville. But some one should snatch that microphone away from him, since it is a metallic intrusion.

Comic Greatness

Mr. Howard is one of the wonderworkers of comic greatness. He uses here two of his familiar numbers, rescued from other shows, and they deserve survival. The double talk item of the radio-Voice of Experience is as crazy as anything, and when he and Mr. Holtz get together and discuss the shortcomings of other comedians it is a superlative piece of foolishness.

One of my complaints against the show is that Mr. Howard and Mr. Baker are too long offstage. Mr. Baker's material is not up to his old standard, but he is after all head man in his field, and we know what he can do. Nor does he work with his old assurance with the stooge in the stage box.

Mr. Draper stopped the show. Though he didn't come on until 11 o'clock, the audience would not leave or let him quit and he danced himself into what, with any one else, would have been exhaustion. One number, without accompaniment, seemed the perfection of timing and emphasis, but why an audience wishes to break into such superb rhythms in sound and movement with applause remains a mystery. Silence until the very end is the finest tribute such a dancer can have.

Unstarred Delights

Some of the unstarred numbers are delightful, notably Gene Sheldon and his guitar, and a comedy team called Masters and Rollins, one-half of which is a loose-jointed lady of hilarious chassis. Hazel Scott sings and plays superbly, though I think a better presentation would help her in lighting and staging, and Joan Merrill deserves to use her voice without the guilty microphone. It doesn't do right by her.

Altogether, "Priorities" as a war-time title suggests a little lesson as well as good entertainment. Its material is not altogether new, but much of it is excellent and still serviceable, demonstrating that it is wise to make the best of what we have.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
March 13, 1942

Vaudeville

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

THEY are bringing back vaudeville at the Forty-sixth Street Theater, and the results are very comical, indeed. With such eminent clowns as Lou Holtz, Willie Howard and Phil Baker frolicking about with the sort of freedom which a variety show offers "Priorities of 1942," as the proceedings are vaguely known, is naturally filled with merriment and abandon. Some of the individual numbers offered by the assembled vaudevillians are less than masterly, but once those classic gentlemen, Messrs. Holtz, Howard and Baker, get to roaming up and down the stage, chatting informally of this and that and mumbling their fine contempt for all other shows and performers, you have the season's most disarming hilarity. "Priorities of 1942" is good, low-down fun.

If you expect anything new in the way of comedy, the Forty-sixth Street Theater is no place for you these afternoons and evenings. The humor is of the tried and true variety, with every quip a carefully tested one, but they have so handsomely withstood the ravages of time that they supply not only a beautifully nostalgic appeal for us old-time playgoers but are pretty wonderful in their own right. Lou Holtz is a brilliant story-teller and a genuine Broadway wit, Willie Howard is one of the great comedians of his time and Phil Baker is an invariably winning performer, and, since "Priorities" gives them the run of the house, it is a show to gladden the heart of any one who loves rowdy vintage comedy. Certainly I doubt if there is anything funnier in town than Mr. Holtz's story of the three stubborn men. But please don't ask me; it's the way he tells it.

* * *

Before going on to tell you about the other performers permit me to enter a word of protest against the microphones the players use. Lou Holtz, Willie Howard and Phil Baker didn't need them in the old days, and neither they nor their newer colleagues would really have to have them now. They merely get in the way. Having made my complaint, I must hastily go on to say that there is a comic named Gene Sheldon, a gentleman new to me, who is in the noble tradition. A buffoon of the zany type, alternately shy and forward, who has some difficulties with his musical instrument, gets into considerable trouble when the curtain fights back at him, and in general proves himself an excellent fellow at pantomime. Going to another extreme, I could certainly do without a frightening pair of clowns, male and female, called Masters and Rollins.

* * *

Paul Draper, of course, continues to demonstrate that he is one of the superb dancers of the world, while the good-looking Miss Hazel Scott does some fascinating and exhilarating things with a piano. As night-club-goers know, Miss Scott is among the authentic artists. An engaging and attractive dance team, the Barrys, are a welcome addition to the show, and, while Miss Joan Merrill is inclined to be a bit fancy in her mannerisms, she is a handsome and effective singer of popular songs. Just to prove that this really is a variety bill there are skillful skaters and acrobats on hand, while a French girl named Diane Denise and a Venezuelan called Conchita add to the work's somewhat limited pictorial effectiveness. "Priorities of 1942" has a low admission scale and is given twice a day, and it might well make vaudeville pretty popular again.

"Priorities of 1942"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
March 13, 1942

Hold Your Horses, The End Is OK

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

IN A SHOW called *Priorities of 1942* Broadway made another gesture last night to bring back vaudeville, or something like it; and for almost half the evening it looked as if it would have to bring it back on a stretcher. Then the show got going, and by 11:30 it was going great guns, thanks to a combination of talent that included two fine comics of yesteryear, Lou Holtz and Willie Howard, and two fine performers of here and now, Hazel Scott and Paul Draper.

That combination does a lot, I think, to answer the mooted question as to whether vaudeville is finished. The two-a-day that was in its prime when I was in my pram is almost certainly finished. They'll never bring back vaudeville by bringing back old vaudeville acts. Nor will they ever get very far with the things in last night's show that lie in a barren No Man's Land between vaudeville and the Broadway revue. But letting Lou Holtz wander gaily through an evening as master of ceremonies is something else again. And letting Holtz and Howard get together for a hilarious razzing of such fellow-comics as Cantor and Jessel and Olsen & Johnson, is all right with me at any hour of the day or night. There should have been a triumphant trio of old-timers last night, but somehow Phil Baker wasn't up to the other two.

It was those darlings of the night clubs, Hazel Scott and Paul Draper, who really made the evening spin, however. Miss Scott tossed *Black Eyes* around the piano in a dazzling medley of keys, tempos and tones; and then went even more vertiginously, though for me less happily, to work on *Tea for Two*. But it was Paul Draper who stopped the show. He may not tap as well as a Bill Robinson or dance half as well as a Kreutzberg; I won't argue with the experts about his mixing his terpsichorean drinks. But his clean and brilliant and completely individual style seems to me pretty wonderful, whatever you want to call it.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
March 13, 1942

Big Time Vaudeville Gets Pulmotor Again

"Priorities of 1942," variety show produced by Clifford Fischer and the Shuberts at the 46th St. Theatre, March 12, 1942.

★ ★+

By ROBERT SYLVESTER

JUST the other night Fred Allen was saying that if an actor will just stand still long enough somebody will build a theatre around him. So it was inevitable that somebody should have a similar idea for such established entertainers as Willie Howard, Lou Holtz, Phil Baker, Paul Draper and Joan Merrill. They were standing still somewhere—just weighing offers, of course—and before they knew it were whisked into the 46th St. Theatre for a vaudeville show called "Priorities of 1942."

The plan, conceived and executed by the Messrs. Clifford Fischer and Shubert, was to recreate one of those old Palace vaudeville shows of golden memory. And for an hour or so last night it looked as though they might make it.

For Willie Howard is one of the great funny men of the American stage. You can turn him loose anywhere, on a street corner or in a $200,000 extravaganza, and he'll have everybody howling. Lou Holtz is an original story teller who can handle an audience with experienced deftness. Phil Baker is an old favorite who gets the most out of surefire material. Paul Draper is generally accepted as the best solo dancer we have. And there aren't more than four girls who can sing a song better than Joan Merrill, and none who has her extremely attractive appeal.

So when these specialists are out before a tired gold curtain, or the battered blue one, everything is all right. Willie's burlesque of the radio Voice of Experience, his grotesque and mad clowning, his wonderful, abused-looking face, are almost enough in themselves. Holtz is a master at breaking pace. His impromptu material and new stories are as good as his old ones. Last night's audience also refused to let Paul Draper leave the stage and he was still improvising as this reporter listened to deadline's call.

But it's necessary to report that either the vaudeville formula is no longer workable or last night's show was badly routined. For "Priorities" is uneven and there are atrocious mistakes in staging and production which any oldtime vaudeville man could have avoided. The comedy is bunched together in spots. There is a lack of dancing in the first half and an overabundance in the last. And the full stage "flash" numbers are confused and senseless.

In fairness, "Priorities" doesn't pretend to be "Let's Face It" and you can see a matinee for $1 top or a night show for $2. Probably after a few performances some of the small-time talent will be dropped and the show re-routined so that it will build and have a little pace. It is by no means a bad show and has, in fact, many hilarious moments. But somebody has yet to do a real, first class variety show somewhere in this town.

Now Available

The Complete 1940 Volume (Vol. I) Price $20.00

also

The Complete 1941 Volume (Vol. II) Price $20.00

A Valuable and Authoritative Record of the Contemporary Theatre

Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS

"Priorities of 1942"

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
March 13, 1942

Priorities of '42 Is Variety Bill with Rich Lot of Headliners

By JOHN MASON BROWN

IS PRIORITIES OF 1942 vaudeville come to life again? Or an informal revue? Such niceties in name calling are beside the point. All that matters is that Clifford C. Fischer's variety bill at the 46th Street is always a bargain and often uproarious entertainment. At a price scale ranging from $1.10 to 55 cents for matinees and from $2.20 to 55 cents for all evenings except Saturday, it offers more diversion to the minute than many a slicker, costlier and successful musical which could be named.

And why not? Mr. Fischer has assembled a princely lot of headliners. They are friendly people who are masters of their jobs. They know how to make an audience eat out of their hands. They have been doing it for years. In lean times this in itself is a relief service of special importance.

• • •

Take Lou Holtz, for example, but don't take him away from a show to which he contributes so much. He is back, white suit, trim figure, cane, many accents and all, to act as Master of Ceremonies. And he has never been in finer form. He pulls the show together. His personality is a better plot than most musical comedies can boast. No one can tell a droller dialect story than he or tell it better. In addition to his tasks as curtain raiser and cheer leader, he has a generous supply of yarns to spin, some old, some new, but all worth hearing as he embroiders them.

As if Mr. Holtz were not enough, there is also Willie Howard. This same sentence could be rewritten to read as if Mr. Howard were not enough there is also Lou Holtz. Mr. Howard is a convulsingly funny fellow. He, too, has a genius for accents. There is nothing stingy about his Scotch, for instance, as playgoers relearn to their pleasure when the intermission is over. Mr. Howard's spoofing of the radio's Voice of Experience is likewise superior sport. Mr. Howard and Mr. Holtz do not always work alone. They occasionally team up. When the two of them are gagging together, especially when they are damning Broadway successes as only actors can, their fooling is so convulsing that you wish it could go on all night.

But there are other welcome headliners. One of these is Phil Baker, who joins Mr. Howard and Mr. Holtz when in their stage talk they wander into Walgreen pastures. Although somewhat subdued last night, Mr. Baker is a performer it is very pleasant to have back. He still rings wonderous music from his accordion, and is still heckled from a box. Furthermore, he has his own comedy to add in his impersonation of Charles Boyer and his singing of the "Do" songs.

• • •

Fortunately the "culture," which by tradition goes along with clowning in vaudeville, is not supplied at the 46th Street by the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet or a stout Carmen who has outgrown the Met. Instead there is Paul Draper, that dancer of rare charm and distinction, who with his tappings can write his own melodies or match the elegances of courtly music in the grace of his own lithe person. He is a joy to watch.

These are the headliners of Priorities of 1942. But among its many recommendations must also be listed the rhythms which Hazel Scott can extract from a piano, the wonderful crazy antics of Gene Sheldon, the rough acrobatics of the high-voiced Nonchalants, the furious hazards of the Helen Reynolds skaters and, I suppose, Joan Merrill's singing.

The chorus costumes could easily be better. The settings are largely makeshift. And there are dead spots. Vaudeville, however, would not be vaudeville if everything on a bill were to each patron's liking. I for one wish Mr. Fischer would dispense with those troublesome and unnecessary amplifiers. But on the whole I enjoyed his two-a-day hugely, and consider us all lucky to be in at least on these Priorities.

NEW YORK TIMES
March 13, 1942

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"Priorities of 1942"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

POSSIBLY Paul Draper did not know that he was the hero of ordinary theatregoers. But he knows it now. Toward the close of a mediocre vaudeville show, "Priorities of 1942," he came on the stage of the Forty-sixth Street Theatre last evening to try two or three of his lean and crisp dances, and the audience would not let him go. Mr. Draper's reputation is a little exclusive. Although his dancing is not esoteric it is far removed from the sort of flamboyant stepping that is usual on the music-hall stage. But there was nothing he could do last evening, to either classical or popular music, that did not rouse the enthusiasm of a vaudeville-show audience. If his success proves that he is an artist, it also proves that theatre audiences have taste and do not miss the beauty of an art that is solidly grounded.

• • •

Mr. Fischer's attempt to reestablish vaudeville begins as badly as possible. Although he has rounded up a trio of celebrated comics —Lou Holtz, Willie Howard and Phil Baker—none of them is bringing anything original to the show. A good deal of the material sounds like warmed-over radio stuff, and sometimes the comedians seem to have no material at all. There was some pretty lame adlibbing in the wide-open spaces of the Forty-sixth Street last evening. Several of the other actors are not theatre performers. They hide behind voice amplifiers and confine their wooing to the microphone. Vaudeville will never come back if it is no livelier than night club entertainment.

But along toward 10:30 "Priorities of 1942" began to look and behave like a show for the theatre. Although Hazel Scott secreted most of her famous Arthur Murray ballad in the microphone, she swung some music on the piano like a thoroughbred. Gene Sheldon, too, is a theatre performer. He wears baggy pants, which is legitimate; he strums the banjo like an inspired zany and adds for good measure some hilarious and insane mummery. He was appreciated last evening. And then came Mr. Draper's half-hour of triumph.

• • •

To have a variety show so poorly planned and organized is disappointing to the thousands of people who have never believed that this sort of entertainment need be over for good. Mr. Fischer's comics are first-rate men. Willie Howard has long been one of this department's favorites, although the law of diminishing returns begins to operate when he starts repeating. Lou Holtz, with his brassy assurance and broad range of assorted Jewish accents, is one of the funniest men in the business, but a good part of his current material is coming out of his stock barrel. Mr. Baker is taking his current engagement very casually, indeed.

Vaudeville needs pace and robustiousness. It is a wonderful medium if the producer and performers bring enthusiasm to it. Apart from Paul Draper, Hazel Scott and Gene Sheldon, "Priorities of 1942" is half-hearted and only half related to the theatre. With the people he has on the bill, Mr. Fischer ought to be able to put on a rousing show. He might begin by throwing all the microphones into the theatre alley.

NEW YORK POST
March 13, 1942

"Priorities of 1942" Brings Vaudeville Back to Broadway

By WILELLA WALDORF

SOMEBODY tries to bring vaudeville—the good old two-a-day without motion pictures—back to Broadway every season or so, generally with a pronounced lack of success. Now, at last, it appears Clifford C. Fischer actually has done it. "Priorities of 1942," revealed last night at the 46th Street Theatre, is an entertaining variety revue, strong on comedy, but by no means lacking the other ingredients necessary for a well-balanced performance. There is even a chorus dubbed the Versailles Beauties that sings, dances and on occasion, talks. At half the price of most Broadway musicals, the show is a genuine bargain.

With three star comedians—Lou Holtz, Willie Howard and Phil Baker—on hand, it often seems like old home week at the Palace. Mr. Holtz, who acts as master of ceremonies, is in and out all the time, with some amusing patter, the usual supply of stories and the Holtz cane and cigar. Willie Howard does a couple of revue numbers out of past hits and supplies an Olsen and Johnson touch by mooching around through the audience as an itinerant Scotsman hunting his lost umbrella. Turns out he thought he was at Loew's State. As for Phil Baker, he is back from radio with all the dear old props: his accordion, a stooge in a box to do some heckling, and a fetching young lady.

Along toward the end of Act 1 the three of them get together before the curtain and pan all of the other musical shows in town, with Mr. Howard throwing in quick but devastating imitations of Cantor, Jessel, etc. Very amusing goings-on.

Paul Draper Dances

Late in the evening Paul Draper arrives to do some of his expert tap dancing, and Mr. Draper does not step down to his audience just because he happens to be involved in a vaudeville show. He presents the same sort of thing he is accustomed to doing in the concert halls, and they like it. Some day, we trust, an astute manager will station sharpshooters at strategic points in the theatre to pick off moronic individuals who insist upon bursting into sporadic applause while tap dancers are doing their most intricate tapping.

Hazel Scott's piano rhythms are something to hear. Joan Merrill's moaning into the microphone, something about Blues in the Night, would sound less mechanical if she dispensed with the loud-speaker, and the roller skating of a bevy of young women known as the Helen Reynolds troupe is astonishing.

Diane Denise does Gallic trilling on occasion and Rowena Rollins of the team of Masters and Rollins is an eccentric comedienne who is apparently triple jointed, and will imitate anything from Ginger Rogers to a monkey in the zoo on the slightest provocation. Her partner, Mr. Masters, does some neat stepping. Comedy tumbling by the Nonchalants, banjo playing by Gene Sheldon and more dancing by the Barrys and Lari and Conchita from Venezuela round out a generally diverting bill.

Too Much Microphoning

Just why so many performers nowadays seem to think it is necessary to cower behind a microphone in a theatre the size of the 46th Street, we cannot imagine. In a show that is bringing back what the late Mr. Ziegfed used to call "in the flesh" entertainment, it seems rather foolish to make it sound as mechanical as possible.

Can it be that radio loud-speakers, juke boxes, and moving picture sound tracks have so distorted the public's taste that it is no longer able to appreciate singing, or even speaking, without amplification? We don't believe it for a moment. Last night's complicated hook-up not only tripped up some of the performers but also occasionally emitted rude noises in the balcony.

The microphone, however, is the only thing to which we can take violent exception in "Priorities of 1942." At 55c to $1.10 for matinees and a top price of $2.20 evenings (except Saturdays when it will be $2.75), it is a good buy. Two performances Mondays through Fridays, three Saturdays and Sundays.

"A Kiss for Cinderella"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
March 11, 1942

Barrie's "Kiss for Cinderella" Revived, Starring Luise Rainer

"A Kiss for Cinderella," by James M. Barrie. Revived by Cheryl Crawford and Richard Krakeur at the Music Box, New York, March 10, 1942.

★ ★ ★—

By BURNS MANTLE

SPEAKING of Barrie's "A Kiss for Cinderella" at the Music Box, some one certainly should revive that author's "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals" before the current war is much older.

As a matter of fact, if someone had thought of compressing "A Kiss for Cinderella" into two acts, and playing it with "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals" in one, someone would have made a lot of money and a lot of friends for the theatre as well.

Because where "Cinderella" is fairly dependent upon that limited portion of the playgoing public admitting an instinctive fondness for fantasy, "The Old Lady" is most satisfying to another playgoing public that dotes on sentimental realism. And "Cinderella" could do with a bit of contrasting realism.

I had completely forgotten the war background of the romance of the bold and handsome London bobby and the half-starved little visionary who dreamt herself into the fairyland that centers in Kensington Gardens, where Peter Pan and the loyal Wendy lived.

Few Changes

Yet here it is, with no more than a half dozen lines changed, fitting into the present world's confusion as neatly as it did in 1916, when Barrie wrote it on a theme inspired by the first world war.

Cinderella is no longer a cockney. She has become a Viennese orphan, to fit the Luise Rainer accent, which continues fairly thick. But she is still an odd bit of humanity picked out of an artist's studio for investigation by a muddle-headed roundsman. That was the time all strange folk were being questioned as to their wartime activities.

Cindy, loving children, had gathered together a quartet of smudge-faced angels from her slum section, cleaned them up and deposited them in boxes in her diggings. There she fed them on milk and buns and fairy stories.

One night, which was the night she had promised them that her fairy godmother was going to take her to a grand ball, she went to sleep in the doorway and dreamed of the ball, in which her investigating policeman became a fairy prince in blue velvet knickers.

Long, Long Ago

It is nearly twenty-six years since Maude Adams and Norman Trevor played "Cinderella" for 152 performances at the Empire. And twenty-six years can play tricks with the best man's memory.

You'll not be finding anyone today to admit there can ever be another Maude Adams, nor that there can ever be another combination of playwright and player equalling that of the gentle, sentimental Scot and the appealing American heroine for whom he wrote so many charm plays.

But little Miss Rainer, a dark wisp of a woman with burning eyes and a deep emotional reaction to character, brings a new Cinderella to life and plays many of her scenes with compelling art.

Her first and her last acts are, I think, splendidly moving, and if she loses hold of her audience in the middle scenes, the fault is partly Barrie's and partly the strain of trying to fit a Viennese personality into a definitely British type of romance.

Ralph Forbes is hale and husky and often pleasantly "romantical" as the blundering bobby. Cecil Humphreys makes as much as need be of Mr. Bodie and Edith King pleasantly doubles the godmother and the doctor.

Cheryl Crawford has provided an atmospheric setting and Lee Strasberg doesn't allow the direction to become too sluggish. He could warn the players again about dropping their voices. The first audience was friendly and apparently well pleased.

NEW YORK POST
March 11, 1942

Luise Rainer in a Revival of Barrie's "A Kiss for Cinderella"

By WILELLA WALDORF

SIR JAMES M. BARRIE'S "A Kiss for Cinderella," written during the last war, was first produced here at the Empire Theatre on Christmas night, 1916, with Maude Adams as the emaciated little slavey who mothers a quartette of war orphans in a miserable London hovel, and dreams that she is Cinderella meeting her Prince Charming at the ball. It was Miss Adams' last play in New York. After the local run, she took it on tour and then retired from the stage.

Last night's production at the Music Box was the first revival of the work Broadway has seen since those days. With a bit of retouching here and there, the play now occurs during the present war. It is charmingly presented by Cheryl Crawford and Richard Krakeur, with a good deal of imagination and taste, but it is not one of Barrie's more deathless works, and it has aged perceptibly in the past quarter of a century.

Attending with an open mind, in that we never saw Maude Adams or anybody else act it before, we found it gently whimsical, in the traditional Barrie manner, but more in the nature of what London calls a Christmas pantomime than any other sort of entertainment we can think of at the moment. As Cinderella's dream ball opened in the second act, it occurred to us that we should have brought a youngster along. Unfortunately the only children under ten that we happen to know are far too sophisticated to sit before it without sniggering at the wrong moments. "Arsenic and Old Lace" is more their style.

Perhaps on the whole it would be better to invite an older person who will be reminded of the days when Barrie was in his heyday.

What those theatregoers who were lucky enough to see Maude Adams will think of Luise Rainer in the part it is hard to say, since Miss Adams appears to have cast a spell over her audiences, leaving some of them still in a trance-like state. Miss Rainer seemed to us physically suited to the role, giving on the whole a graceful, carefully thought out performance. It must be admitted that the Viennese academy of acting of which she is a distinguished alumna is not a favorite of ours. No matter how much effort is made to get away from it, there is still a studied coyness in the performances of Elisabeth Bergner, Marta Eggerth, Miss Rainer and other charm school graduates that we have always found singularly trying.

It is happily to be reported that of the lot Miss Rainer is the least distressing, and there are times when she gets away from the prescribed mannerisms entirely and becomes genuinely touching. She fits the role to perfection, in that she appears not to have had a square meal in ages, and her dancing in the ballroom scene is lightly and attractively done.

As for the accent it is explained away by a remark of Mr. Bodie's early in the first act. In the original play, we believe, he told the inquiring policeman that there was a touch of the Scotch about her. At the Music Box he reports that there is a touch of Austrian, which there certainly is. And they've substituted a Chinese child for the Belgian among the war orphans. It all works in nicely enough except that the whole business manages to sound somehow like a hollow voice from the past.

It's a little sad, too, to reflect on what's happened to the Prince of Wales since "A Kiss for Cinderella" was first produced. Miss Thing obviously has the bachelor prince all mixed up in her dreams with the nice policeman who befriends her, but they've had to soft pedal the Wales part now. After all, he is no longer a bachelor, and he's no longer a Prince.

Miss Rainer is supported by a pleasant cast headed by Ralph Forbes, who makes an engaging bobby, and Cecil Humphreys, acting a typically Barriesque old fossil with a kind heart and a tendency to fussiness. The four war orphans are delightful.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
March 11, 1942

A Kiss-Off for Cinderella

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

HAVING last encountered *A Kiss for Cinderella* when I read it at the age of 15, I had no premonition of what I was in for last night. I knew, of course, that it always behooves one to be on one's guard against second-rate Barrie; but that was hardly enough with which to meet the onslaught of warm wet goo that slapped against one's sides and dripped down one's neck at the Music Box last night. Barrie's version of the Cinderella story makes the Perrault tale of our childhood seem like the starkest sort of realism. For when he wrote this tale, Barrie assuredly sold out to the confectioners; he displayed a positively unerring eye for everything sentimental and saccharine and cute. It would have been far simpler—and far fairer—if he had merely gone one step further and said:

"The scene is laid in the interior of a candy box."

For even fairy stories should show some kind of pride and self-respect, which this one, all wet lashes and sticky kisses, doesn't do. The story of the wistfully gay, half-starved London mite who seeks her Prince Charming and finds him at last in real life (after he has wooed her in fancy dress in her opulent dreams) in the person of a London bobby, is probably bad enough. But it might also have been harmless, and it might even—had Barrie been at his best—have been charming. Only Barrie was in all respects at his worst. He was for plastering everything with those wee elfin touches of his, and for dipping his pen into the jampot instead of the inkwell. He was for being whimsical without being humorous, and mawkish without being moving. He was even for leaving his little waif asleep on her doorstep while thick white snow fell all around her!

It's so bad the producers wouldn't let sleeping waifs lie. It's too bad, too, that Luise Rainer chose such slush for her Broadway debut. Not that at times, with her fragile and flower-like look and manner, she wasn't appealing, though at other times she fell right into the sentimental trap that Barrie had laid for her.

The rest of the cast was not very good, while the direction was for the most part downright bad.

"A Kiss for Cinderella"

NEW YORK TIMES
March 11, 1942

Luise Rainer Appears in a Revival of James M. Barrie's Wartime Fantasy, 'A Kiss for Cinderella,' at the Music Box

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NOW that England is at war again, it is time to revive Barrie's "A Kiss for Cinderella," which Maude Adams first played in New York on Christmas Day in 1916. For a kind of misty war atmosphere hovers around this fantastic drama about an underfed and over-imaginative London slavey. As played by Luise Rainer, the Viennese actress, at the Music Box last evening, it is not the enchanting moonstruck comedy that many people still remember.

For Miss Rainer speaks The Barrie's English with difficulty, missing therefore much of the pawky humor in the dialogue; and her restless descriptive acting remains pretty much on the surface of a part that is largely sentiment and warm-hearted caprice. But even with this impediment to full expression, "A Kiss for Cinderella" has a streak of genius in it. Although the first half of the evening is shattered by Miss Rainer's gaucheries of accent and style, the ball scene is still a gem of drollery, the final love scene is dainty and delightful and the character of the policeman is a rare piece of comedy. To people who are not haunted by memories of Maude Adams's performance, the current revival may be more satisfying than it is to this courier.

* * *

Probably no one but Barrie would ever imagine a fable like "A Kiss for Cinderella." Certainly no one else could write it with the subtle turns of phrase that give sentiment a surface of humor and an occasional flicker of satire. It is the story of a fanciful drudge who has kept some images of magnificence in her ill-assorted mind. An unusually solemn policeman suspects her of being a German spy and tries to fit her queer words into the dull framework of his constabulary mind. But when he discovers the sort of joyous creature she is, he falls in love with her and she with him. The celebrated Cinderella's ball, which is as fine a thing as Barrie ever wrote, is a drudge's dream of glories and splendors, pulled out of drawing by her poverty-stricken experience. Even more than the character of the policeman, it is a rare comedy achievement.

* * * *

All of "A Kiss for Cinderella" is well staged under Lee Strasberg's direction and with a notable series of mobile settings by Harry Horner. But none of it matches the ballroom scene for tinsel grandeur and dry humor. For Cinderella's idea of something completely regal is a movie addict's nightmare, the common accent dispelling the aura of ostentation. Much of Barrie is too arch by far for the squeamish appetite of modern theatregoing. But his knack of understatement and of precision in phrasing keep this scene, and also the last one, comfortably inside the bailiwick of expert prose-writing.

* * * *

Miss Rainer is a distinguished actress. She has won two Academy Awards for her motion-picture acting. She is an energetic and accomplished player with a knowledge of how to use the stage. To penalize a foreigner for lack of facility in speaking English seems ungracious. But when it makes many English words unintelligible, misses subtle inflections of speech and produces some unpleasant vocal sounds, a reviewer can scarcely pass over her basic defects as trivial in a play that depends a good deal on style. Miss Rainer's Cinderella is further handicapped by external mannerisms. She has imagined Barrie's character like a series of pictures. What she acts is an uncommonly active little match girl with affectations of cuteness. Cinderella is not her part.

'A KISS FOR CINDERELLA'

A play in three acts by Sir James M. Barrie; directed by Lee Strasberg; settings by Harry Horner; choreography by Catherine Littlefield; costumes by Paul du Pont; revived at the Music Box on March 10, 1942, by Cheryl Crawford and Richard W. Krakeur. The cast:

Mr. Bodie	Cecil Humphreys
Policeman	Ralph Forbes
Miss Thing	Luise Rainer
Mr. Jennings	Victor Morley
Mrs. Maloney	Emily Loraine
Marion	Doris Patston
Coster	Le Roi Operti
Gladys	Abby Bonime
Delphine	Elizabeth Leland
Ching Ching	Marilyn Chu
Gretchin	Patsy O'Shea
Godmother	Edith King
Lord Mayor	Victor Morley
Lord Times	Roland Bottomley
Censor	Glen Langan
King	Cecil Humphreys
Queen	Ivy Troutman
Venus	Eunice Lee
Bishop	Le Roi Operti
Ellen	Jacqueline Gateley
Dr. Bodie	Edith King
Danny	Glen Langan
Nurse	Sarah Burton

Ralph Forbes's policeman might be a little more stupid in the first scene, and might, indeed, be more intelligible, especially when his chin-strap is in place. But he is intelligent and likeable, and avoids the mawkishness that might easily creep in. Cecil Humphreys' elderly artist is enjoyably deferential, especially when he takes the trouble to speak distinctly. As the godmother and lady doctor, Edith King is giving a good performance, and probably should not be faulted for protruding the stomach when attired in military dress. Uniforms have a tendency to draw a personality out.

Even the first half of "A Kiss for Cinderella" is probably better than you would suspect from this revival. The scene at the ball and the last act are Barrie at his best—original, hospitable and comic.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
March 11, 1942

'Kiss for Cinderella' Staged at Music Box

Luise Rainer Appears in Revival With a Few Revisions of Barrie's Text

By JOHN ANDERSON

ONE of the things which makes play reviewing a hazardous and occasionally boggling job is that an apparently intelligent producer, after a sensible production of resounding success will turn around and pull an incredible and bewildering boner. It is common. It is human. But it is also flabbergasting.

Here for instance is Miss Cheryl Crawford with a bulging box office at her revival of "Porgy and Bess" squandering her smart money on a revival at the Music Box last night of Sir James M. Barrie's "A Kiss for Cinderella," the whimsy-whamsy written during the last war which the worshippers of the little baronet and Maude Adams joined 25 years ago in acclaiming a wonder-work.

I did not see that production, but I do not doubt that Miss Adams lent to it some of her own special and legendary enchantment. But the play was never anything more than a sugar-stick, confected out of the sweet-soothing syrups of sentimentality, and as played dankly last night by Luise Rainer in her first stage appearance here it proved a dreary and disheartening event.

To begin with it should be evident to anyone who takes the trouble to read "A Kiss for Cinderella" that merely changing a few lines and putting in a reference to Churchill to move it from World War I to World War II is not enough, assuming that the play is worth moving at all. This is a different sort of war; its emotional atmosphere has no relation to World War I. Launching Barrie's frail fantasy again into the present state of the world seems about as pertinent as going out for a Naxi submarine on water wings, armed with a box of cream puffs.

Durable Irony

But even if it survived on that point it obviously has none of the durable irony and shrewd Scotch wisdom which make "What Every Woman Knows" and the "Twelve Pound Look" delightful and which help to preserve "Mary Rose" and "Dear Brutus," against the accumulation of time and sugar.

Here we have Sir James in his most elfin mood of sheer fantasy telling the story of Miss Thing, a slavey in some London studios, and called by one of the painters Cinderella. She believes the fairy tale to be actually about herself, and a Bobby who investigates her strange habit of carrying off boards, finds not only that she is keeping four war orphans in boxes in her little room, but that he is the Prince Charming of her dream. The dream is hers in a fever delirium, and the Bobby is hers in solid reality when she recovers. He even gallantly kisses her feet and (steady now) puts on a pair of glass slippers.

Whatever else the play needs in its playing there must be in the acting approach to its sentimental qualities, a sense of innocent wonder, of glad childish make believe, of gentle goodness and simple trust at once pathetic in humility and proud in imagination. To say that Miss Rainer suggests none of these qualities is to put the best face possible on a sadly misplaced performance by a seriously miscast star.

As contrasted with the things she had to do and say Miss Rainer seemed sophisticated, sorrowful, modern instead of timeless, and rather harsh. She is seldom quiet; her short gestures appear nervous and irrelevant, and the whole performance missed the dreamy child-like intensity which I suppose is the only bridge in acting to Barrie's never-never land, a locale brutally renamed last night "Never-Never Mind." It is a place that is fortunately missing from most current maps.

Not Barrie's Waif

I do not mean, of course, that the very qualities which hindered Miss Rainer last night might not help her enormously in another part. She suggests waifhood expertly, but she suggests a career waif, experienced, resourceful and tough—not Barrie's sweet princess on moon-struck poverty.

Miss Crawford and Mr. Krakeur (who is associated with her as producer) certainly backed up their judgment with a fine production. Harry Horner has contributed some imaginative and delightful settings and Paul DuPont's costumes, especially at Cinderella's ball, are handsomely colorful.

Cecil Humphreys, whose B. B. in "The Doctor's Dilemma" remains one of the delightful memories of that production, manages to make the special brand of Barrie mush he deals out here, sound reasonably human in a crisp and intelligent performance, and Ralph Forbes helps enormously by an excellent portrayal of the Bobby Prince Charming. Though such taffy pulls hardly seem Lee Strasberg's dish as a director he isn't stuck with it.

Not as stuck as I was.